



Kustom Tonka Trucks

Written By: Todd Lappin

TOOLS:

- [Drill bit \(1\)](#)
- [Electric drill \(1\)](#)
- [Flathead screwdriver \(1\)](#)
- [Hammer \(1\)](#)
- [Sandpaper \(1\)](#)
or a finishing sander wheel
- [Socket \(1\)](#)

PARTS:

- [Tonka Classics Dump Truck \(1\)](#)
about \$20
- [Spray paint \(1\)](#)
- [Goo Gone \(1\)](#)
or other gunk remover
- [Contact paper \(1\)](#)
or automotive decal sheet
- [LocTite thread-locking compound \(1\)](#)
- [Machine screws \(1\)](#)
- [Masking tape \(1\)](#)

SUMMARY

Tonka's classic dump truck is big, durable, fun, and extremely yellow. When we were expecting a daughter, I hit on the idea of giving her a pink Tonka. And not just pink; I wanted to give her a pink Hello Kitty Tonka, a slick mashup of two childhood icons!

Happily, the venerable Tonka dump truck turns out to be a versatile platform for mods and customization. Here's everything you need to know about creating your own Kustom Tonkas.

Step 1 — Buy a classic Tonka dump truck.



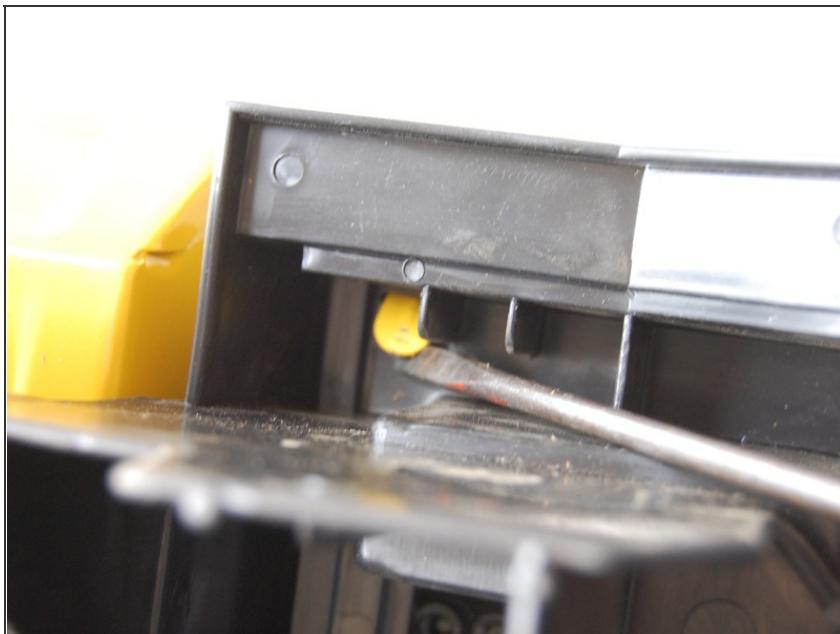
- This isn't as easy as it used to be. Hasbro, the company that owns the Tonka brand, recently created an all-new Mighty Dump Truck. The new model is bigger, more modern-looking, and a bit more expensive. The older one — which employs the same basic design Tonka has used since 1964 — is still offered, but like old Coke, it's now marketed as Tonka Classics, and it's getting harder to find. Fortunately, most Toys "R" Us stores still carry the Tonka Classics Dump Truck right alongside the newer model, for the bargain price of about \$20. Cheap!

Step 2 — Deconstruct the truck.



- Tonka dump trucks are famously rugged, and much of their strength comes from the simplicity of their design. All you need to take one apart is a flathead screwdriver and an electric drill.
- Remove the wheels. Use a long, thin, flathead screwdriver to gently but firmly pry 1 chrome cap off the end of each axle. Start by wedging the blade under the cap, then roll it side-to-side to loosen the cap. Try to avoid bending or mutilating the caps, because you'll need them later for reassembly. Save the caps and axles in a safe place, so you don't lose them.
- Remove the tires from the wheels. There's no glue holding the yellow plastic wheels to the black plastic tires — it's just a tight fit. You may be able to push the wheels out with your bare hands. If not, just place the tire facedown over the center of a roll of masking tape, and tap the axle hole lightly with a hammer. The wheel should loosen and pop right out.

Step 3



- Remove the metal cab deck. With the wheels removed, turn the chassis upside down. Inside the front wheel wells, you'll see 4 bent metal tabs that hold the metal cab deck to the plastic chassis. It may take some wiggling, but these tabs can be bent straight if you use a long flathead screwdriver. Once the tabs are straightened and unbent, the cab assembly lifts right off the chassis. Remove the plastic windshield and the rubber exhaust pipe, and put them in a safe place for later.

Step 4



- Remove the dump body from the chassis. This is the only tricky part of the deconstruction process. The dump body is attached to the chassis with 2 metal rivets. These must be drilled out. Begin by using a small drill bit to create pilot holes in the center of each rivet.
- Using the pilot holes as a guide, swap in a 7/32" drill bit to bore out the rivet entirely. Be careful! Although the metal is tough, the plastic chassis is soft, so avoid drilling the holes in the chassis beyond their original size. It's not the end of the world if the holes get a bit frayed, but try to minimize the damage to the plastic as best you can.

Step 5



- Remove the Tonka stickers. The stripes on the sides of the dump body are easy enough to scrape off, and you can remove any adhesive residue with Goo Gone.
- Be gentle when peeling the decals from the sides of the cab. If you remove them in one piece, they can be reused as handy templates for making replacement decals that match your paint scheme.
- When you're finished, you should have a collection of parts that looks like this.

Step 6 — Prep for painting.



- Out of the box, Tonkas come with glossy yellow paint. Stripping the gloss from the metal surfaces will help your new paint adhere. Use very fine grit sandpaper or, even better, a finishing sander wheel to get rid of the shine. When you're done, the old paint should be an even, dull yellow.

Step 7 — Bring the color.



- The truck body can be painted one color, and the wheels painted as a contrasting accent. On the chassis, the grill and gas tanks can be masked and painted silver to give them a chrome look. Just think of the Tonka as a canvas, and paint it accordingly.
- The Krylon spray paints sold in most hardware stores work just fine; just be sure to apply the paint in nice, even strokes, and lay on several coats to create a hearty finish, allowing plenty of time for drying between coats.

Step 8



- Automotive finishes look better and are even more durable, if you have access to a proper painting booth (or if you can convince your local auto body shop to paint a Tonka for you). Whatever paint finish you'd apply to a real custom car or truck, you can also apply to a Tonka.

Step 9 — Rebuild it.



- Putting a Tonka back together is even easier than taking it apart. Reinstall the exhaust pipe and cab windshield to the cab deck, then reattach the cab deck to the plastic chassis and secure it by bending the metal tabs inside the front wheel wells.

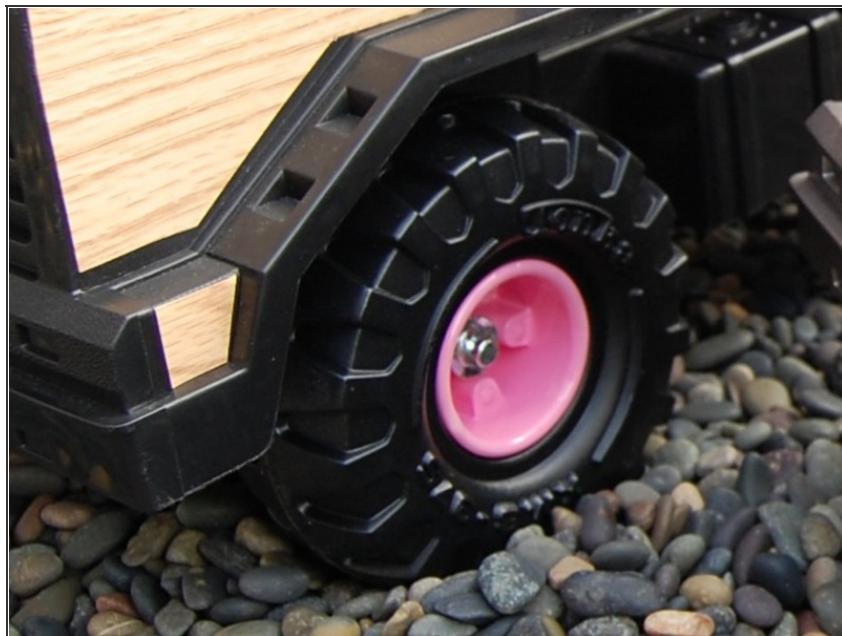
Step 10



- To reattach the dump body to the chassis, replace the original rivets with similar-sized machine screws, washers, and nuts. The screw heads go on the outside of the chassis rails, and the nuts go on the inside.
- **IMPORTANT: After you tighten the nuts, apply LocTite adhesive to secure the nuts in place. Without the LocTite, the nuts will wiggle loose when the dump body is repeatedly raised and lowered. If the nuts fall off entirely, they may become a choking hazard.**



Step 11



- Press the wheels back into the plastic tires, thread each axle through a wheel and then through the holes in the chassis, then slide the opposing wheel over the axle on the other side.
- To reattach the axle end caps securely without chipping your freshly painted wheels, use two 3/8" sockets. Place one socket on your work surface and center the fixed axle end cap inside it, facing downward. On the upward-facing wheel, place the loose end cap onto the axle, then slip the other socket over it. Give the socket a firm tap with a hammer, and the end cap should lock in place.

Step 12 — Add the flair.



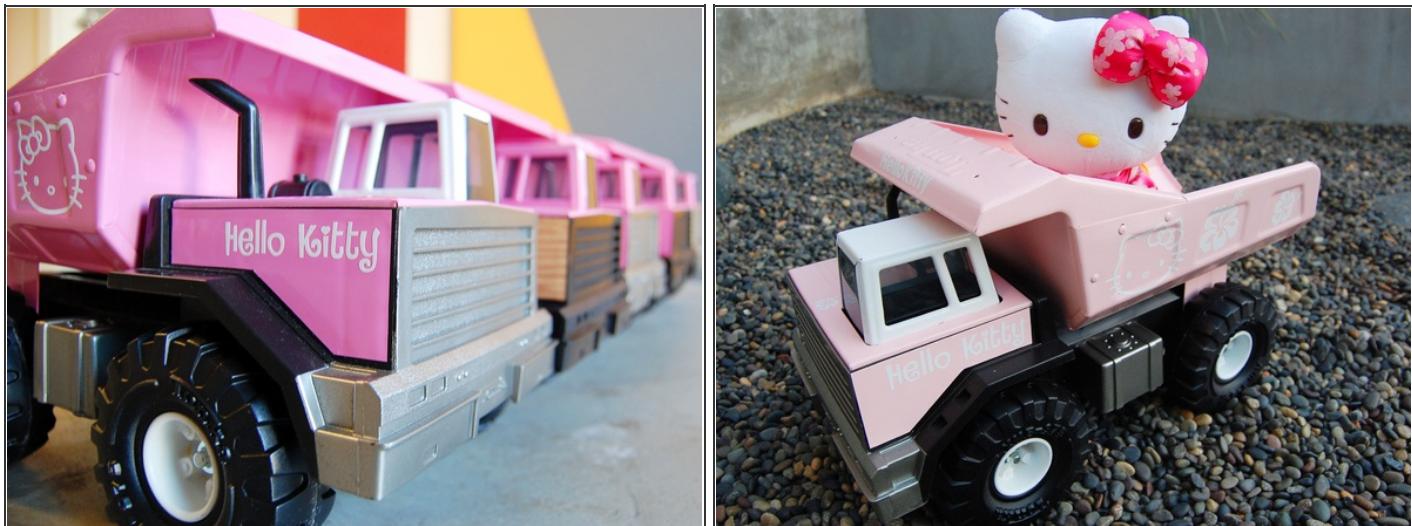
- With your Tonka repainted and reassembled, it's time to add accents and details. Contact paper or automotive decal sheets are good replacements for the Tonka stickers you peeled off the sides of the cab. Alternatively, if you want a perfect match with the paint you used on the body of your truck, but you can't find decals or contact paper in the same color, spray a sheet of thin styrene plastic with your leftover paint. After the paint dries, cut the styrene to fit (using those old stickers as the template), then glue the trimmed pieces to the sides of the cab.

Step 13



- If you've got a steady hand and some artistic skill, you can pinstripe your truck or give it airbrushed graphics.

Step 14



- Laser-cut vinyl decals are an easy alternative, with hundreds of designs available, including popular cartoon characters, stripes, and flames. Look for them at your local sign shop or hot rod store, or on eBay.

Step 15



- Happy motoring!

To reassemble your device, follow these instructions in reverse order.

This project first appeared in [MAKE Volume 19](#).

